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ABSTRACT

This reference service policy manual provides general guidelines to encourage reference service of the highest possible quality and to insure uniform practice. The policy refers only to reference service in the University Libraries and is intended for use in conjunction with other policies and procedures issued by the Reference Services Division. The policy includes sections on: goals of reference service; the reference collection (Ready Reference, "reserve" reference materials, and circulation of reference materials); services provided at the reference desk; level and quality of reference service; ethics of reference service; service priorities; and other responsibilities of reference librarians. (THC)

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# REFERENCE SERVICE POLICY STATEMENT

Reference Services Division

University Libraries

State University of New York at Albany

1985

Prepared by:
William F. Young, Coordinator of the Reference Unit
in consultation with Reference Services Division Faculty
and Main Reference Librarians

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I. PURPOSE

The purpose of the Reference Service Policy is to provide general guidelines for reference service of the highest possible quality and to insure uniform practice. This policy refers only to reference service at the University Library and is to be followed in conjunction with other policies and procedures issued by the Reference Services Division and the University Libraries.

II. GOALS OF REFERENCE SERVICE

The primary goal of reference service is to provide direct, personal reference service to faculty, students and staff in support of the academic and research programs offered by the University. A secondary goal is to provide reference service to community users. These goals are achieved by providing information at the reference desk and by facilitating the use of the libraries' collections.

III. THE REFERENCE COLLECTION.

The Reference Unit shall maintain, as far as budgetary constraints permit, an up-to-date, relevant and accessible collection of reference materials. The Coordinator of Reference Services is responsible for the development of the reference collection in consultation with other library faculty. The Coordinator determines which materials are placed in the collection.

A. Ready Reference Collection

The Ready Reference Collection shall consist of materials which reference librarians need to consult and (or) show to library users on a regular basis. These materials are, therefore, located on shelving across from the reference office. Some of these titles, because of the high demand for their use, are duplicated and secured in the reference office. The Coordinator of Reference Services, in consultation with all other reference librarians, determines which materials shall be duplicated and which materials will be housed in these areas.

B. "Reserve" Reference Materials

Reference materials in frequent but temporary demand may be placed "on reserve" in the reference office with the secured Ready Reference Collection only with the approval of the Coordinator of Reference Services for a period determined by the Coordinator.

C. Circulation of Reference Materials

Reference materials housed in the reference collection generally are non-circulating. Exceptions may be made depending on the nature of the materials. The Coordinator or Acting Coordinator of Reference Services, the Assistant Director of the Reference Services Division or the on-duty reference librarian "in charge" may grant

exceptions. Materials designated "building only" may circulate at the discretion of the reference librarian on duty in consultation, if necessary, with the appropriate bibliographer. At the request of the teaching faculty, certain "building only" titles never circulate. A list of these is provided at the reference desk.

IV. SERVICES PROVIDED AT THE REFERENCE DESK

Services provided at the reference desk include general information concerning our collections and services and specific aid in locating information and bibliographic material.

A. General Reference (see also Recording Statistics)

1. Reference questions, e.g., finding information in or identifying periodicals or periodical citations, books, government documents, law cases; finding biographical and directory information, book reviews, criticisms, addresses, statistics, definitions.
2. Extended reference questions, e.g., usually evolving from general reference questions taking fifteen minutes or more.
3. Instructional service, e.g., advice and instruction on how to approach research or find information in a specific area or on a topic; how to use reference tools, the card catalog, GEAC, etc.

4. Directional queries, e.g., information on the locations of library materials and services.
5. Telephone service, e.g., usually related to reference questions (see above).

B. Online Ready Reference Service

This service provides quick reference information which is not readily available in printed sources. Only databases available from DIALOG/BRS will be searched at the reference desk; requests for online ready reference searches on other systems will be referred to Computer Search Service (CSS) or the Graduate Library of Public Policy (GLPP) as appropriate. The suggested criteria for such searches are:

1. To locate bibliographic information or to complete or verify bibliographic citations.
2. To use the CROS database or other databases for determining print sources and subject headings or relevant databases for in-depth searches.
3. To search for the meanings of acronyms or initialisms.
4. To search for directory information such as author or institutional addresses.

## V. LEVEL AND QUALITY OF REFERENCE SERVICE

### A. General Statement

Reference Service at SUNY Albany is traditionally aimed at providing "full" reference service to the library user. Reference librarians will take the time to find specific information or provide guidance in the pursuit of information including instruction in the use of library tools. A reference librarian will not conclude the reference interview without providing some information or guidance. The individual librarian will, however, exercise judgment in implementing this policy in specific instances. Objective factors, such as the needs of the user, time available, the number of other patrons seeking assistance as well the knowledge which the librarian may draw upon must be taken into account. A reasonable effort in all cases will be made to answer every reference question. When particular considerations such as time constraints intervene, the librarian will arrange to meet with the user in order to complete the information search or find the information at a more convenient time and report to the user. For course assignments designed to teach the use of specific reference tools, guidance on use rather than answers to assignment questions will be provided.

Reference librarians will not interpret the intellectual content of the information found in sources.

B. Referrals

The reference librarian may find it necessary or advisable to refer patrons to other collections, services or sources of information within or external to the University Libraries.

1. Referrals to Other Librarians

When making referrals the librarian, if possible, should first notify colleagues of the problem and inform them of what sources have been checked.

2. Referrals to Other Collections/Services Within the University Libraries

Referrals will be made after verification that the needed items, materials, information or services are available for the patron. The reference librarian may make the verification call or ask the patron to do so.

3. Referrals to Other Libraries, Institutions and Departments

Such outside referrals should not be made without calling ahead to verify that outside persons or institutions may be of assistance.

4. Referrals to Interlibrary Loan

Under no circumstances should referrals to ILL be made without first determining that the requested item or equivalent resources are not in the University Libraries and that the user is affiliated with SUNYA. The reference librarian should make certain that the user has a complete bibliographic citation before referring him to Interlibrary Loan.

5. Referrals to Computer Search Service (CSS)

As part of the reference interview process, the reference librarian may determine that the patron requires an in-depth online search. The reference librarian will identify the database(s) to be searched and refer the patron to CSS search before a search appointment can be made for a patron. In all instances, a reference librarian must approve the need for a CSS search before a search appointment can be made for a patron.

VI. ETHICS OF REFERENCE SERVICE

All reference queries will be considered confidential and the privacy rights of the patrons respected. Outside of a professional context, there shall be no discussion of a user's needs. All members of the University community shall be treated equally.

VII. SERVICE PRIORITIES

The Reference Unit gives priority to all activities involving direct service to individual users.

A. Patrons at the Reference Desk and the Librarian's Responsibility

Service to library users in the reference area takes priority over any other activity. Reference Librarians, assigned to scheduled hours, are expected to arrive and be ready to offer service at their scheduled time. Scheduled reference service responsibilities take priority over other work obligations.

B. Telephone Queries

Since priority service is given to users who come to the reference area, telephone calls have a lower priority. Normally, the reference librarian shall provide no more than three serial or card catalog verifications for each telephone patron. When the reference desk is busy the librarian assigned to the reference office shall help at the reference desk. During such periods, reference librarians answering telephone queries should do one or several of the following: (1) put the caller temporarily on hold, (2) suggest that the caller come into the library, (3) suggest that the caller call back at another time.

C. Service to Non-SUNYA Users

SUNYA faculty, students and staff are the Univerity Libraries primary user group. Generally, no differentiation is made between SUNYA and non-SUNYA users when providing routine reference service. In the case of unusually time-consuming inquiries, the question of a user's affiliation may be determined and non-SUNYA users having access to another library may be referred to that library. No distinctions should be made when the Libraries have unique resources in staff and material which meet the information needs of a user.

D. Correspondence

It is the responsibility of the Coordinator of Reference Services, or his designee, to respond to reference queries received by mail.

VIII. OTHER RESPONSIBILITIES OF REFERENCE LIBRARIANS

A. Communication and Professional Development

1. Reference librarians are responsible for reading the messages attached to the daily statistics sheet. The purpose of these messages is to record information and special short-term instructions related to reference and needed by staff on duty.
2. Reference librarians are responsible for being aware of new developments within the Libraries which in any way affect reference service. They are to attend faculty meetings of the Reference Services Division, read all relevant communications such as the minutes of the various divisional and departmental meetings and the University Libraries' internal newsletter.
3. Reference librarians are expected to be aware of professional developments related to reference librarianship. Reading relevant professional literature and becoming familiar with new reference titles are essential for providing quality service. Reference librarians

shall, for example, examine the new reference books displayed on the "New Book Truck" and examine the list of new reference titles circulated by the Coordinator of Reference Services.

B. Approachability and Attitude

Assistance to the individual library user is the chief responsibility of the reference librarian. In order to encourage users to seek assistance, it is imperative that reference librarians be approachable. It is important that while serving at the reference desk or in the reference office librarians are not engrossed in activities extraneous to their chief responsibility. Hence, reference librarians shall not, while at the Reference Desk:

-engage in lengthy non-reference conversations with other staff members,

-eat, drink or smoke at the reference desk or in the reference office,

-read recreational literature.

Librarians may bring work to the reference desk or reference office, such as memoranda, materials related to collection development duties, etc. The reading of professional literature is also acceptable. All such activity must not, however, interfere with the process of service. Staff must be careful not to become so engrossed in other work that they fail to see readers in need of assistance in the reference area or at the public catalog.

Reference librarians are expected to be as patient and composed as possible in dealing with the variety of patrons served. Problem patrons will be dealt with in a polite but firm manner. If a patron becomes abusive, appropriate action (e.g. calling Security) should be taken.

Reference staff members will exercise judgment when questions are asked at the reference desk at closing time. The library user may be requested to return the next day if, after an initial attempt, it appears the question will require lengthy research.

C. Telephone Use

The reference telephone lines exist to provide reference service to off-site patrons. Reference telephone lines shall not, therefore, be used to carry on library business other than related to reference service. Incoming personal calls shall be kept to a minimum.

D. Recording Statistics

It is the responsibility of all reference librarians to keep an accurate record of all reference queries. A record of statistics is essential in order to provide a factual base for review of reference service and staffing levels.

For statistical purposes a reference question is one which requires any of the following to answer: personal knowledge, not related to directional information; knowledge of library techniques, organization and procedures; knowledge of library holdings; or knowledge of bibliographic tools. A directional question is one which is concerned with the physical location of rooms, offices, etc. and not related to interpretation, locations, use, or organization of information resources.